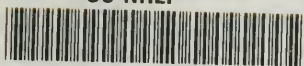


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THE BRITISH ACADEMY

THE ANNUAL SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

1918

# Shakespeare and England

By

Sir Walter Raleigh

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SHAKESPEARE AND ENGLAND

BY SIR WALTER RALEIGH

*Read July 4, 1918*

THERE is nothing new and important to be said of Shakespeare. In recent years antiquaries have made some additions to our knowledge of the facts of his life. These additions are all tantalizing and comparatively insignificant. The history of the publication of his works has also become clearer and more intelligible, especially by the labours of Mr. Pollard; but the whole question of quartos and folios remains thorny and difficult, so that no one can reach any definite conclusion in this matter without a liberal use of conjecture.

I propose to return to the old catholic doctrine which has been illuminated by so many disciples of Shakespeare, and to speak of him as our great national poet. He embodies and exemplifies all the virtues, and most of the faults, of England. Any one who reads and understands him understands England. This method of studying Shakespeare by reading him has perhaps gone somewhat out of vogue in favour of more roundabout ways of approach, but it is the best method for all that. Shakespeare tells us more about himself and his mind than we could learn even from those who knew him in his habit as he lived, if they were all alive and all talking. To learn what he tells we have only to listen.

I think there is no national poet, of any great nation whatsoever, who is so completely representative of his own people as Shakespeare is representative of the English. There is certainly no other English poet who comes near to Shakespeare in embodying our character and our foibles. No one, in this connexion, would venture even to mention Spenser or Milton. Chaucer is English, but he lived at a time when England was not yet completely English, so that he is only half-conscious of his nation. Wordsworth is English, but he was a recluse. Browning is English, but he lived apart or abroad, and was a tourist of genius. The most English of all our great men of letters, next to Shakespeare, is certainly Dr. Johnson, but he was no great poet. Shakespeare, it may be suspected, is too

poetic to be a perfect Englishman ; but his works refute that suspicion. He is the Englishman endowed, by a fortunate chance, with matchless powers of expression. He is not silent or dull ; but he understands silent men, and he enters into the minds of dull men. Moreover, the Englishman seems duller than he is. It is a point of pride with him not to be witty and not to give voice to his feelings. The shepherd Corin, who was never in court, has the true philosophy. 'He that hath learned no wit by nature nor art may complain of good breeding or comes of a very dull kindred.'

Shakespeare knew nothing of the British Empire. He was an islander, and his patriotism was centred on

This precious stone set in the silver sea,  
Which serves it in the office of a wall,  
Or as a moat defensive to a house,  
Against the envy of less happier lands.

When he speaks of Britons and British he always means the Celtic peoples of the island. Once only he makes a slip. There is a passage in *King Lear* (iv. vi. 249) where the followers of the King, who in the text of the quarto versions are correctly called 'the British party', appear in the folio version as 'the English party'. Perhaps the quartos contain Shakespeare's own correction of his own inadvertence ; but those of us, and we are many, who have been blamed by northern patriots for the misuse of the word English may claim Shakespeare as a brother in misfortune.

Our critics, at home and abroad, accuse us of arrogance. I doubt if we can prove them wrong ; but they do not always understand the nature of English arrogance. It does not commonly take the form of self-assertion. Shakespeare's casual allusions to our national characteristics are almost all of a kind ; they are humorous and depreciatory. Here are some of them. Every holiday fool in England, we learn from Trinculo in *The Tempest*, would give a piece of silver to see a strange fish, though no one will give a doit to relieve a lame beggar. The English are quarrelsome, Master Slender testifies, at the game of bear-baiting. They are great drinkers, says Iago, 'most potent in potting ; your Dane, your German, and your swag-bellied Hollander are nothing to your English'. They are epicures, says Macbeth. They will eat like wolves and fight like devils, says the Constable of France. An English nobleman, according to the Lady of Belmont, can speak no language but his own. An English tailor, according to the porter of Macbeth's castle, will steal cloth where there is hardly any cloth to be stolen, out of a French hose. The

devil, says the clown in *All's Well*, has an English name; he is called the Black Prince.

Nothing has been changed in this vein of humorous banter since Shakespeare died. One of the best pieces of Shakespeare criticism ever written is contained in four words of the present Poet Laureate's Ode for the Tercentenary of Shakespeare, 'London's laughter is thine'. The wit of our trenches in this war, especially perhaps among the Cockney and South country regiments, is pure Shakespeare. Falstaff would find himself at home there, and would recognize a brother in Old Bill.

The best known of Shakespeare's allusions to England are no doubt those splendid outbursts of patriotism which occur in *King John*, and *Richard II*, and *Henry V*. And of these the dying speech of John of Gaunt, in *Richard II*, is the deepest in feeling. It is a lament upon the decay of England, 'this dear, dear land'. Since we began to be a nation we have always lamented our decay. I am afraid that the Germans, whose self-esteem takes another form, were deceived by this. To the right English temper all bragging is a thing of evil omen. That temper is well expressed, where perhaps you would least expect to find it, in the speech of King Henry V to the French herald:

To say the sooth,—

Though 'tis no wisdom to confess so much  
Unto an enemy of craft and vantage,—  
My people are with sickness much enfeebled,  
My numbers lessened, and those few I have  
Almost no better than so many French;  
Who, when they were in health, I tell thee, herald,  
I thought upon one pair of English legs  
Did march three Frenchmen. Yet, forgive me, God,  
That I do brag thus! This your air of France  
Hath blown that vice in me; I must repent.  
Go therefore, tell thy master here I am:  
My ransom is this frail and worthless trunk;  
My army but a weak and sickly guard;  
Yet, God before, tell him we will come on,  
Though France himself and such another neighbour  
Stand in our way. There's for thy labour, Montjoy.  
Go bid thy master well advise himself:  
If we may pass, we will; if we be hindered,  
We shall your tawny ground with your red blood  
Discolour; and so, Montjoy, fare you well.  
The sum of all our answer is but this:  
We would not seek a battle as we are;  
Nor, as we are, we say we will not shun it;  
So tell your master.

That speech might have been written for the war which we are waging to-day against a less honourable enemy. But, indeed, Shakespeare is full of prophecy. Here is his description of the volunteers who flocked to the colours in the early days of the war :

Rash inconsiderate fiery voluntaries,  
 With ladies' faces and fierce dragons' spleens,  
 Have sold their fortunes at their native homes,  
 Bearing their birthrights proudly on their backs,  
 To make a hazard of new fortunes here.  
 In brief, a braver choice of dauntless spirits  
 Than now the English bottoms have waft o'er  
 Did never float upon the swelling tide.

And here is his sermon on national unity, preached by the Bishop of Carlisle :

O, if you rear this house against this house,  
 It will the woefullest division prove  
 That ever fell upon this cursed earth.  
 Prevent it, resist it, let it not be so,  
 Lest child, child's children, cry against you 'Woe'!

The patriotism of the women is described by the Bastard in *King John* :

Your own ladies and pale-visag'd maids  
 Like Amazons come tripping after drums :  
 Their thimbles into armed gauntlets change,  
 Their needles to lances, and their gentle hearts  
 To fierce and bloody inclination.

Lastly, Queen Isabella's blessing, spoken over King Henry V and his French bride, predicts an enduring friendship between England and France :

As man and wife, being two, are one in love,  
 So be there 'twixt your kingdoms such a spousal,  
 That never may ill office, or fell jealousy,  
 Which troubles oft the bed of blessed marriage,  
 Thrust in between the paction of these kingdoms,  
 To make divorce of their incorporate league ;  
 That English may as French, French Englishmen,  
 Receive each other ! God speak this Amen !

One of the delights of a literature as rich and as old as ours is that at every step we take backwards we find ourselves again. We are delivered from that foolish vein of thought, so dear to ignorant conceit, which degrades the past in order to exalt the present and the



future. It is easy to feel ourselves superior to men who no longer breathe and walk, and whom we do not trouble to understand. Here is the real benefit of scholarship; it reduces men to kinship with their race. Science, pressing forward, and beating against the bars which guard the secrets of the future, has no such sympathy in its gift.

Anyhow, in Shakespeare's time, England was already old England; which if she could ever cease to be, she might be Jerusalem, or Paradise, but would not be England at all. What Shakespeare and his fellows of the sixteenth century gave her was a new self-consciousness and a new self-confidence. They foraged in the past; they recognized themselves in their ancestors; they found feudal England, which had existed for many hundreds of years, a dumb thing; and when she did not know her own meaning, they endowed her purposes with words. They gave her a new delight in herself, a new sense of power and exhilaration, which has remained with her to this day, surviving all the airy philosophic theories of humanity which thought to supersede the old solid national temper. The English national temper is better fitted for traffic with the world than any mere doctrine can ever be, for it is marked by an immense tolerance. And this, too, Shakespeare has expressed. Falstaff is perhaps the most tolerant man who was ever made in God's image. But it is rather late in the day to introduce Falstaff to an English audience. Perhaps you will let me modernize a brief scene from Shakespeare, altering nothing essential, to illustrate how completely his spirit is the spirit of our troops in Flanders and France.

A small British expeditionary force, bound on an international mission, finds itself stranded in an unknown country. The force is composed of men very various in rank and profession. Two of them, whom we may call a non-commissioned officer and a private, go exploring by themselves, and take one of the natives of the place prisoner. This native is an ugly low-born creature, of great physical strength and violent criminal tendencies, a liar, and ready at any time for theft, rape, and murder. He is a child of Nature, a lover of music, slavish in his devotion to power and rank, and very easily imposed upon by authority. His captors do not fear him, and, which is more, they do not dislike him. They found him lying out in a kind of no-man's land, drenched to the skin, so they determine to keep him as a souvenir, and to take him home with them. They nickname him, in friendly fashion, the monster, and the mooncalf, as who should say Fritz, or the Boche. But their first care is to give him a drink, and to make him swear allegiance upon the bottle.

‘Where the devil should he learn our language?’ says the non-commissioned officer, when the monster speaks. ‘I will give him some relief, if it be but for that.’ The prisoner then offers to kiss the foot of his captor. ‘I shall laugh myself to death’, says the private, ‘at this puppy-headed monster. A most scurvy monster! I could find in my heart to beat him, but that the poor monster’s in drink.’ When the private continues to rail at the monster, his officer calls him to order. ‘Trinculo, keep a good tongue in your head: if you prove a mutineer, the next tree—— The poor monster’s my subject, and he shall not suffer indignity.’

In this scene from *The Tempest* everything is English except the names. The incident has been repeated many times in the last four years. ‘This is Bill,’ one private said, introducing a German soldier to his company. ‘He’s my prisoner. I wounded him, and I took him, and where I go he goes. Come on, Bill, old man.’ The Germans have known many failures since they began the War, but one failure is more tragic than all the rest. They love to be impressive, to produce a panic of apprehension and a thrill of reverence in their enemy; and they have completely failed to impress the ordinary British private. He remains incurably humorous, and so little moved to passion that his daily offices of kindness are hardly interrupted.

Shakespeare’s tolerance, which is no greater than the tolerance of the common English soldier, may be well seen in his treatment of his villains. Is a liar, or a thief, merely a bad man? Shakespeare does not much encourage you to think so. Is a murderer a bad man? He would be an undiscerning critic who should accept that phrase as a true and adequate description of Macbeth. Shakespeare does not dislike liars, thieves, and murderers as such, and he does not pretend to dislike them. He has his own dislikes. I once asked a friend of mine, long since dead, who refused to condemn almost anything, whether there were any vices that he could not find it in his heart to tolerate. He replied at once that there were two—cruelty, and bilking; which, if the word is not academic, I may paraphrase as cheating the helpless, swindling a child out of its pennies, or leaving a house by the back door in order to avoid paying your cabman his lawful fare. These exclusions from mercy Shakespeare would accept; and I think he would add a third. His worst villains are all theorists, who cheat and murder by the book of arithmetic. They are men of principle, and are ready to expound their principle and to defend it in argument. They follow it, without remorse or mitigation, wherever it leads them. It is Iago’s logic that makes him so terrible; his mind is as cold as a snake and as hard as a surgeon’s knife. The

Italian Renaissance did produce some such men ; the modern German imitation is a grosser and feebler thing, brutality trying to emulate the glitter and flourish of refined cruelty.

With his wonderful quickness of intuition and his unsurpassed subtlety of expression Shakespeare drew the characters of the Englishmen that he saw around him. Why is it that he has given us no full-length portrait, carefully drawn, of a hypocrite ? It can hardly have been for lack of models. Outside England, not only among our enemies, but among our friends and allies, it is agreed that hypocrisy is our national vice, our ruling passion. There must be some meaning in so widely held an opinion ; and, on our side, there are damaging admissions by many witnesses. The portrait gallery of Charles Dickens is crowded with hypocrites. Some of them are greasy and servile, like Mr. Pumblechook or Uriah Heep ; others rise to poetic heights of daring, like Mr. Chadband or Mr. Squeers. But Shakespeare's hypocrites enjoy themselves too much ; they are artists to the finger-tips. It may be said, no doubt, that Shakespeare lived before organized religious dissent had developed a new type of character among the weaker brethren. But the Low Church Protestant, whom Shakespeare certainly knew, is not very different from the evangelical dissenter of later days ; and he did not interest Shakespeare.

My own impression is that Shakespeare had a free and happy childhood, and grew up without much check from his elders. It is the child who sees hypocrites. These preposterous grown-up people, who, if they are well-mannered, do not seem to enjoy their food, who are fussy about meaningless employments, and never give way to natural impulses, must surely assume this veil of decorum with intent to deceive. Charles Dickens was hard driven in his childhood, and the impressions that were then burnt into him governed all his seeing. The creative spirit in him transformed his sufferings into delight ; but he never outgrew them ; and, when he died, the eyes of a child were closed upon a scene touched, it is true, here and there with rapturous pleasure, rich in oddity, and trembling with pathos, but, in the main, as bleak and unsatisfying as the wards of a workhouse. The intense emotions of his childhood made the usual fervours of adolescence a faint thing in the comparison, and if you want to know how lovers think and feel you do not go to Dickens to tell you. You go to Shakespeare, who put his childhood behind him, so that he almost forgot it, and ran forward to seize life with both hands. He sometimes looked back on children, and saw them through the eyes of their elders. Dickens saw men and women as they appear to children.

This comparison suggests a certain lack of sympathy or lack of understanding in those who are quick to see hypocrisy in others. In Dickens lack of sympathy was a fair revenge; moreover, his hypocrites amused him so much that he did not wish to understand them. What a loss it would have been to the world if he had explained them away! But it is difficult, I think, to see a hypocrite in a man whose intimacy you have cultivated, whose mind you have entered into, as Shakespeare entered into the mind of his creatures. Hypocrisy, in its ordinary forms, is a superficial thing—a skin disease, not a cancer. It is not easy, at best, to bring the outward and inward relations of the soul into perfect harmony; a hypocrite is one who too readily consents to their separation. The English, for I am ready now to return to my point, are a people of a divided mind, slow to drive anything through on principle, very ready to find reason in compromise. They are passionate, and they are idealists, but they are also a practical people, and they dare not give the rein to a passion or an idea. They know that in this world an unmitigated principle simply will not work; that a clean cut will never take you through the maze. So they restrain themselves, and listen, and seem patient. They are not so patient as they seem; they must be hypocrites! A cruder, simpler people like the Germans feel indignation, not unmixed perhaps with envy, when they hear the quiet voice and see the white lips of the thoroughbred Englishman who is angry. It is not manly or honest, they think, to be angry without getting red in the face. They certainly feel pride in their own honesty when they give explosive vent to their emotions. They have not learned the elements of self-distrust. The Englishman is seldom quite content to be himself; often his thoughts are troubled by something better. He suffers from the divided mind; and earns the reputation of a hypocrite. But the simpler nature that indulges itself and believes in itself has an even heavier penalty to pay. If, in the name of honesty, you cease to distinguish between what you are and what you would wish to be, between how you act and how you would like to act, you are in some danger of reeling back into the beast. It is true that man is an animal; and before long you feel a glow of conscious virtue in proclaiming and illustrating that truth. You scorn the hypocrisy of pretending to be better than you are, and that very scorn fixes you in what you are. ‘He that is unjust, let him be unjust still; and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still.’ That is the epitaph on German honesty.

I have drifted away from Shakespeare, who knew nothing of the sea of troubles that England would one day take arms against, and



who could not know that on that day she would outgo his most splendid praise and more than vindicate his reverence and his affection. But Shakespeare is still so live a mind that it is vain to try to expound him by selected texts, or to pin him to a mosaic of quotations from his book. Often, if you seek to know what he thought on questions which must have exercised his imagination, you can gather it only from a hint, dropped by accident, and quite irrelevant. What were his views on literature, and on the literary controversies which have been agitated from his day to our own? He tells us very little. He must have heard discussions and arguments on metre, on classical precedent, on the ancient and modern drama; but he makes no mention of these questions. He does not seem to have attached any prophetic importance to poetry. The poets who exalt their craft are of a more slender build. Is it conceivable that he would have given his support to a literary academy,—a project which began to find advocates during his lifetime? I think not. It is true that he is full of good sense, and that an academy exists to promulgate good sense. Moreover his own free experiments brought him nearer and nearer into conformity with classical models. *Othello* and *Macbeth* are better constructed plays than *Hamlet*. The only one of his plays which, whether by chance or by design, observes the so-called unities, of action and time and place, is one of his latest plays—*The Tempest*. But he was an Englishman, and would have been jealous of his freedom and independence. When the grave-digger remarks that it is no great matter if Hamlet do not recover his wits in England, because there the men are as mad as he, the satire has a sympathetic ring in it. Shakespeare did not wish to see the mad English altered. Nor are they likely to alter; our fears and our hopes are vain. We entered on the greatest of our wars with an army no bigger, so we are told, than the Bulgarian army. Since that time we have regimented and organized our people, not without success; and our soothsayers are now directing our attention to the danger that after the war we shall be kept in uniform and shall become tame creatures, losing our independence and our spirit of enterprise. There is nothing that soothsayers will not predict when they are gravelled for lack of matter, but this is the stupidest of all their efforts. The national character is not so flimsy a thing; it has gone through good and evil fortune for hundreds of years without turning a hair. You can make a soldier, and a good soldier, of a humorist; but you cannot militarize him. He remains a free thinker.

New institutions do not flourish in England. The town is a comparatively modern innovation; it has never, so to say, caught on.

Most schemes of town-planning are schemes for pretending that you live in the country. This is one of the most persistent of our many hypocrisies. Wherever working people inhabit a street of continuous red-brick cottages, the names that they give to their homes are one long catalogue of romantic lies. The houses have no gardens, and the only prospect that they command is the view of over the way. But read their names—The Dingle, The Elms, Pine Grove, Windermere, The Nook, The Nest. Even social pretence, which is said to be one of our weaknesses, and which may be read in such names as Belvoir or Apsley House, is less in evidence than the Englishman's passion for the country. He cannot bear to think that he lives in a town. He does not much respect the institutions of a town. A policeman, before he has been long in the force, has to face the fact that he is generally regarded as a comic character. The police are Englishmen and good fellows, and they accept a situation which would rouse any continental gendarme to heroic indignation. Mayors, Aldermen, and Justices of the Peace are comic, and take it not quite so well. Beadles were so wholly dedicated to the purposes of comedy that I suppose they found their position unendurable and went to earth; at any rate it is very difficult to catch one in his official costume.

All this is reflected in Shakespeare. He knew the country, and he knew the town; and he has not left it in doubt which was the cherished home of his imagination. He preferred the fields to the streets, but the Arcadia of his choice is not agricultural or even pastoral; it is rather a desert island, or the uninhabited stretches of wild and woodland country. Indeed, he has both described it and named it. 'Where will the old Duke live?' says Oliver in *As You Like It*. 'They say he is already in the forest of Arden,' says Charles the wrestler, 'and a many merry men with him; and there they live like the old Robin Hood of England. They say many young gentlemen flock to him every day, and fleet the time carelessly, as they did in the golden world.' That is Shakespeare's Arcadia; and who that has read *As You Like It* will deny that it breathes the air of Paradise?

It is quite plain that the freedom that Shakespeare valued was in fact freedom, not any of those ingenious mechanisms to which that name has been applied by political theorists. He thought long and profoundly on the problems of society; and anarchy has no place among his political ideals. It is by all means to be avoided—at a cost. But what harm would anarchy do if it meant no more than freedom for all the impulses of the enlightened imagination and the tender heart?

The ideals of his heart were not political; and when he indulges himself, as he did in his latest plays, you must look for him in the wilds; whether on the road near the shepherd's cottage, or in the cave among the mountains of Wales, or on the seashore in the Bermudas. The laws that are imposed upon the intricate relations of men in society were a weariness to him; and in this he is thoroughly English. The Englishman has always been an objector, and he has a right to object, though it may very well be held that he is too fond of larding his objection with the plea of conscience. But even this has a meaning in our annals; as a mere question of right we are very slow to prefer the claim of the organized opinions of society to the claim of the individual conscience. We know that there is no good in a man who is doing what he does not will to do. We do not like our poets or our men of action to be void of inspiration. A gift is nothing if there is no benevolence in the giver:

For to the noble mind  
Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind.

We ask for the impulse as well as the deed. Even when he is speaking of social obligations Shakespeare makes his strongest appeal not to force or command, but to the natural pity of the heart:

If ever you have looked on better days,  
If ever been where bells have knolled to church,  
If ever sat at any good man's feast,  
If ever from your eyelids wiped a tear,  
And know what 'tis to pity and be pitied,  
Let gentleness my strong enforcement be:  
In the which hope I blush, and hide my sword.

So speaks Orlando when the Duke has met his threats with fair words; and he adds an apology:

Pardon me, I pray you;  
I thought that all things had been savage here,  
And therefore put I on the countenance  
Of stern commandment.

The ultimate law between man and man, according to Shakespeare, is the law of pity. I suppose that most of us have had our ears so dulled by early familiarity with Portia's famous speech, which we probably knew by heart long before we were fit to understand it, that the heavenly quality of it, equal to almost anything in the New Testament, is obscured and lost. There is no remedy but to read it again; to remember that it was conceived in passion; and

to notice how the meaning is raised and perfected as line follows line:

*Portia.*                    Then must the Jew be merciful.  
*Shylock.* On what compulsion must I? Tell me that.  
*Portia.* The quality of mercy is not strained.  
 It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
 Upon the place beneath; it is twice bless'd;  
 It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:  
 'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes  
 The throned monarch better than his crown.  
 His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,  
 The attribute to awe and majesty,  
 Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;  
 But mercy is above this sceptred sway,  
 It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,  
 It is an attribute to God himself,  
 And earthly power doth then show likest God's  
 When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,  
 Though justice be thy plea, consider this,  
 That in the course of justice none of us  
 Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy,  
 And that same prayer doth teach us all to render  
 The deeds of mercy.

That speech rises above the strife of nations; it belongs to humanity. But an Englishman wrote it; and the author, we may be sure, if he ever met with the doctrine that a man who is called on to help his own people is in duty bound to set aside the claims of humanity, and to stop his ears to the call of mercy, knew that the doctrine is an invention of the devil, stupid and angry, as the devil commonly is. There are hundreds of thousands of Englishmen who, though they could not have written the speech, yet know all that it teaches, and act on the knowledge. It is part of the creed of the Navy. We can speak more confidently than we could have spoken three or four years ago. We know that not the extremest pressure of circumstance could ever bring the people of England to forget all the natural pieties, to permit official duties to annul private charities, and to join in the frenzied dance of hate and lust which leads to the mouth of the pit.

Yet Germany, where all this seems to have happened, was not very long ago a country where it was easy to find humanity, and simplicity, and kindness. It was a country of quiet industry and content, the home of fairy stories, which Shakespeare himself would have loved. The Germans of our day have made a religion of war and terror, and have used commerce as a means for the treacherous destruction of the



independence and freedom of others. They were not always like that. In the fifteenth century they spread the art of printing through Europe, for the service of man, by the method of peaceful penetration. My friend Mr. John Sampson recently expressed to me a hope that our air-forces would not bomb Mainz, 'for Mainz', he said, 'is a sacred place to the bibliographer'. According to a statement published in Cologne in 1499, 'the highly valuable art of printing was invented first of all in Germany at Mainz on the Rhine. And it is a great honour to the German nation that such ingenious men are to be found among them. . . . And in the year of our Lord 1450 it was a golden year, and they began to print, and the first book they printed was the Bible in Latin: it was printed in a large character, resembling the types with which the present mass-books are printed.' Gutenberg, the printer of this Bible, never mentions his own name, and the only personal note we have of his, in the colophon of the *Catholicon*, printed in 1460, is a hymn in praise of his city: 'With the aid of the Most High, who unlooses the tongues of infants and oft-times reveals to babes that which is hidden from learned men, this admirable book, the *Catholicon*, was finished in the year of the incarnation of our Saviour MCCCCLX, in the foster town of Mainz, a town of the famous German nation, which God in his clemency, by granting to it this high illumination of the mind, has preferred before the other nations of the world.'

There is something not quite unlike modern Germany in that; and yet these older activities of the Germans make a strange contrast with their work to-day. It was in the city of Cologne that Caxton first made acquaintance with his craft. Everywhere the Germans spread printing like a new religion, adapting it to existing conditions. In Bavaria they used the skill of the wood-engravers, and at Augsburg, Ulm, and Nuremberg produced the first illustrated printed books. It was two Germans of the 'old school, Conrad Sweynheym and Arnold Pannartz, who carried the art to Italy, casting the first type in Roman characters, and printing editions of the classics, first in the Benedictine monastery of St. Scholastica at Subiaco, and later at Rome. They also cast the first Greek type. It was three Germans, Gering, Kranz, and Freyburger, who first printed at Paris, in 1470. It was a German who set up the first printing-press in Spain, in 1474. The Germans were once the cherishers, as now they are the destroyers, of the inheritance of civilization. I do not pretend to explain the change. Perhaps it is a tragedy of education. That is a dangerous moment in the life of a child when he begins to be uneasily aware that he is valued for his simplicity and innocence. Then he resolves

to break with the past, to put away childish things, to forgo affection, and to earn respect by imitating the activities of his elders. The strange power of words and the virtues of abstract thought begin to fascinate him. He loses touch with the things of sense, and ceases to speak as a child. If his first attempts at argument and dogma win him praise and esteem, if he proves himself a better fighter than an older boy next door, who has often bullied him, and if at the same time he comes into money, he is on the road to ruin. His very simplicity is a snare to him. 'What a fool I was', he thinks, 'to let myself be put upon; I now see that I am a great philosopher and a splendid soldier, born to subdue others rather than to agree with them, and entitled to a chief share in all the luxuries of the world. It is for me to say what is good and true, and if any of these people contradict me I shall knock them down.' He suits his behaviour to his new conception of himself, and is soon hated by all the neighbours. Then he turns bitter. These people, he thinks, are all in a plot against him. They must be blind to goodness and beauty, or why do they dislike him? His rage reaches the point of madness; he stabs and poisons the villagers, and burns down their houses. We are still waiting to see what will become of him.

This outbreak has been long preparing. Seventy years before the War the German poet Freiligrath wrote a poem to prove that Germany is Hamlet, urged by the spirit of her fathers to claim her inheritance, vacillating and lost in thought, but destined, before the Fifth Act ends, to strew the stage with the corpses of her enemies. Only a German could have hit on the idea that Germany is Hamlet. The English, for whom the play was written, know that Hamlet is Hamlet, and that Shakespeare was thinking of a young man, not of the pomposities of national ambition. But if these clumsy allegories must be imposed upon great poets, Germany need not go abroad to seek the likeness of her destiny. Germany is Faust; she desired science and power and pleasure, and to get them on a short lease she paid the price of her soul.

For the present, at any rate, the best thing the Germans can do with Shakespeare is to leave him alone. They have divorced themselves from their own great poets, to follow vulgar half-witted political prophets. As for Shakespeare, they have studied him assiduously, with the complete apparatus of criticism, for a hundred years, and they do not understand the plainest words of all his teaching.

In England he has always been understood; and it is only fair, to him and to ourselves, to add that he has never been regarded first and foremost as a national poet. His humanity is too calm and

broad to suffer the prejudices and exclusions of international enmities. The sovereignty that he holds has been allowed to him by men of all parties. The schools of literature have, from the very first, united in his praise. Ben Jonson, who knew him and loved him, was a classical scholar, and disapproved of some of his romantic escapades, yet no one will ever outgo Ben Jonson's praise of Shakespeare.

Triumph, my Britain, thou hast one to show,  
To whom all Scenes of Europe homage owe.  
He was not of an age, but for all time!

The sects of religion forget their disputes and recognize the spirit of religion in this profane author. He cannot be identified with any institution. According to the old saying, he gave up the Church and took to religion. He gave up the State, and took to humanity. The formularies and breviaries to which political and religious philosophers profess their allegiance were nothing to him. These formularies are a convenient shorthand, to save the trouble of thinking. But Shakespeare always thought. Every question that he treats is brought out of the realm of abstraction, and exhibited in its relation to daily life and the minds and hearts of men. He could never have been satisfied with such a smug phrase as 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'. His mind would have been eager for details. In what do the greatest number find their happiness? How far is the happiness of one consistent with the happiness of another? What difficulties and miscarriages attend the business of transmuting the recognized materials for happiness into living human joy? Even these questions he would not have been content to handle in high philosophic fashion; he would have insisted on instances, and would have subscribed to no code that is not carefully built out of case-law. He knew that sanity is in the life of the senses; and that if there are some philosophers who are not mad it is because they live a double life, and have consolations and resources of which their books tell you nothing. It is the part of their life which they do not think it worth their while to mention that would have interested Shakespeare. He loves to reduce things to their elements. 'Is man no more than this?' says the old king on the heath, as he gazes on the naked madman. 'Consider him well. Thou owest the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! here's three of us are sophisticated! Thou art the thing itself: unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings!' That is how Shakespeare lays the mind of man bare, and strips him of his pretences, to try if he be indeed noble.

And he finds that man, naked and weak, hunted by misfortune, liable to all the sins and all the evils that follow frailty, still has faith left to him, and charity. King Lear is still every inch a king.

That is not a little discovery, for when his mind came to grips with human life Shakespeare did not deal in rhetoric; so that the good he finds is real good—'tis in grain; 'twill endure wind and weather'. Nothing is easier than to make a party of humanity, and to exalt mankind by ignorantly vilifying the rest of the animal creation, which is full of strange virtues and abilities. Shakespeare refused that way; he saw man weak and wretched, not able to maintain himself except as a pensioner on the bounty of the world, curiously ignorant of his nature and his destiny, yet endowed with certain gifts in which he can find sustenance and rest, brave by instinct, so that courage is not so much his virtue as cowardice is his lamentable and exceptional fault, ready to forget his pains or to turn them into pleasures by the alchemy of his mind, quick to believe, and slow to suspect or distrust, generous and tender to others, in so far as his thought and imagination, which are the weakest things about him, enable him to bridge the spaces that separate man from man, willing to make of life a great thing while he has it, and a little thing when he comes to lose it. These are some of his gifts; and Shakespeare would not have denied the saying of a thinker with whom he has no very strong or natural affinity, that 'the greatest of these is charity'.



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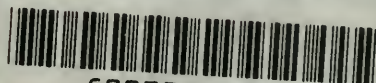
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